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Blasting Out of the Vortex: Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism

FROM CATASTROPHE COMES CREATIVITY - SAIL INTO THE VORTEX.

17/12/2016 Michael Eden Society



Wyndham Lewis mentions again and again that his main objection to Futurism and its founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti is the fetish for machines.

The romantic couching of things like trains or motorbikes in Futurism, for Lewis, doesn't fully take account of what's happening to subjectivity in the early 20th century, merely continuing an unbroken thread from the romantic period which sees man mounting metal rather than a horse.

Lewis is more interested in what's actually at stake in modernity. So what is at stake? Lewis highlights the impact of Copernicus, whose research unseats man as the centre of the universe. The resultant 'convulsion' is the re-configuration of personal, national or human selfhood after this happens, since it literally de-centres humanity and puts in question our special place in the universe. This fact however, was barely perceptible to the masses at the time of Copernicus, who have many decades to adjust since their lives don't give them time or inclination to learn such things.

In modernism it is different. In Lewis' own time knowledge of the various convulsions, along with the dissemination of that knowledge to the masses through media, made it harder and harder to avoid the implications with any credible or authentic naivety. People in Lewis' time have the opportunity and inclination to know. They can hardly ignore it, since technology ensures safety (weapons); guarantees life (medicines); invigorates the economy (mass production), and ensures free time (labour saving products). It's not hard to see why scientists and technological innovation could be viewed as purely benign forces.

Lewis however has honed a potent scepticism and asserts that it is contingency and catastrophe which drive human development onwards, to harness that you need an animal that is alert and prepared, not a hollow automaton fixated on shiny things. Interestingly H.G. Wells would have sympathised with this:

It is a law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism. Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers.

- H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

Futurism's drooling embrasure of technology and progress toward a more comfortable, machine-enabled existence pre-sages the tunnel vision mindlessness of Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs gleefully anticipating a future of digital dross curated only by page impressions. For Lewis, such populism was anathema, and negated the creative power of crisis and catastrophe as outlined above by Wells. His response: Vorticism. A vortex implies catastrophe, and catastrophe asserts a reality which won't let us relax or congeal into the perfect mechanisms of Futurism.

The vortex, in this case, is what keeps us human.

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Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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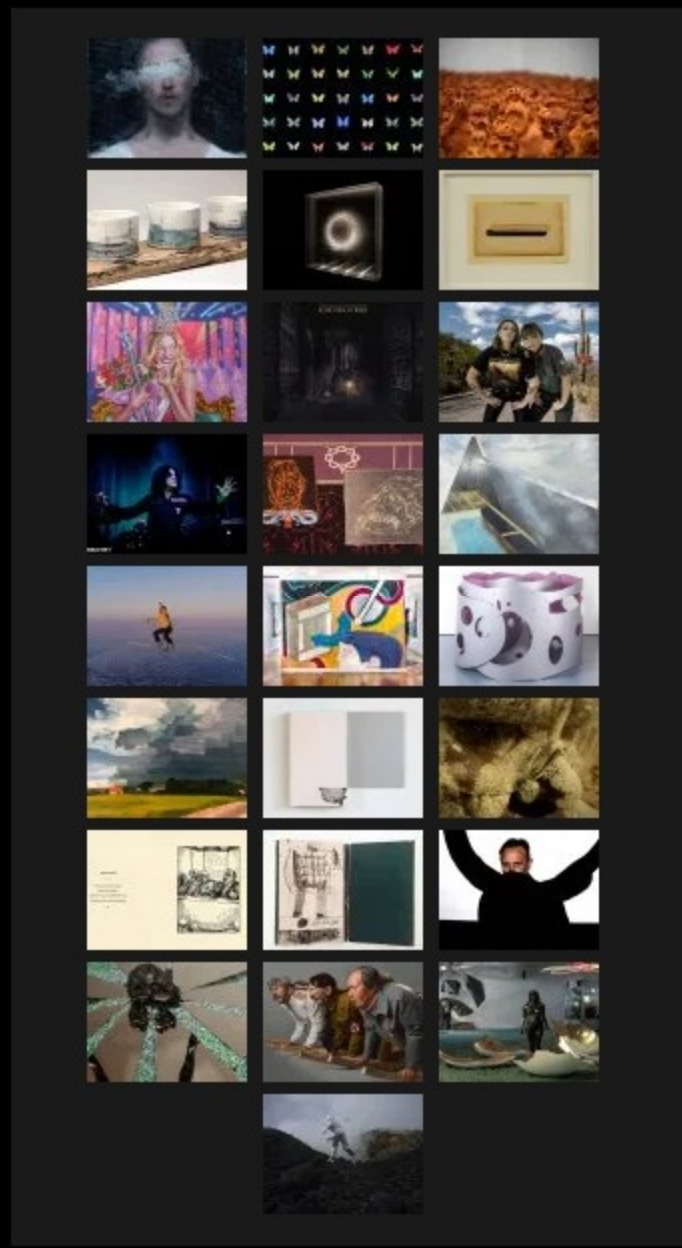
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